

AN
ESSAY
ON THE
LEARNING OF SHAKSPEARE.

ADDRESSED TO

JOSEPH CRADOCK, ESQ.

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PREFACE

TO
THE SECOND EDITION,
1767.

THE author of the following ESSAY was solicitous only for the honour of *Shakspeare*: he hath however, in *his own* capacity, little reason to complain of *occasional* criticks, or criticks *by profession*. The very FEW, who have been pleased to controvert any part of his doctrine, have favoured him with better manners than arguments, and claim his thanks for a further opportunity of demonstrating the futility of *theoretick* reasoning against *matter of fact*. It is indeed strange, that any *real* friends of our immortal POET should be still willing to force him into a situation which is not tenable: treat him as a *learned* man, and what shall excuse the most gross violations of history, chronology, and geography?

Οὐ νικεῖς, ἀδὲ νικῶν is the motto of every polemick: like his brethren at the *amphitheatre*, he holds it a merit to *die hard*; and will not say, *enough*, though the battle be decided. “Were it shewn (says some one) that the old bard bor-

rowed all his allusions from *English* books then published, our *Essayist* might have possibly established his system."—In good time!—This had scarcely been attempted by *Peter Burman* himself, with the library of *Shakspeare* before him.—"Truly, (as Mr. *Dogberry* says,) for *mine own* part, if I were as tedious as a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all on this subject:" but where should I meet with a reader?—When the main pillars are taken away, the whole building falls in course: Nothing hath been, or can be, pointed out, which is not easily removed; or rather which was not *virtually* removed before: a very little *analogy* will do the business. I shall therefore have no occasion to trouble myself any further; and may venture to call my pamphlet, in the words of a pleasant disclaimer against *sermons on the thirtieth of January*, "an answer to every thing that shall hereafter be written on the subject."

But "this method of reasoning will prove any one ignorant of the languages who hath written when translations were extant."—*Shade of Burgersdicius!*—does it follow, because *Shakspeare's* early life was incompatible with a course of education—whose contemporaries, friends and foes, nay, and himself likewise, agree in his want of what is usually called *literature*—whose mistakes from equivocal translations, and even typ-

graphical errors, cannot possibly be accounted for otherwise,—that *Locke*, to whom not one of these circumstances is applicable, understood no *Greek*?—I suspect *Rollin's* opinion of our philosopher was not founded on this argument.

Shakspeare wanted not the stilts of languages to raise him above all other men. The quotation from *Lilly*, in the *Taming of the Shrew*, if indeed it be his, strongly proves the extent of his reading: had he known *Terence*, he would not have quoted erroneously from his *Grammar*. Every one hath met with men in common life, who, according to the language of the *Water-poet*, “got only from *possum* to *posset*,” and yet will throw out a line occasionally from their *Accidence* or their *Cato de Moribus* with tolerable propriety.—If, however, the old editions be trusted in this passage, our author’s memory somewhat failed him in point of *concord*.

The rage of *parallelisms* is almost over, and in truth nothing can be more absurd. “THIS was stolen from *one* classick,—THAT from *another*;” and had I not stept in to his rescue, poor *Shakspeare* had been stript as naked of ornament, as when he first *held horses* at the door of the playhouse.

The late ingenious and modest Mr. *Dodsley* declared himself

“ Untutor’d in the lore of *Greece* or *Rome*;”

yet let us take a passage at a venture from any of his performances, and, a thousand to one, it is stolen. Suppose it be his celebrated compliment to the *ladies*, in one of his earliest pieces, *The Toy-shop*: “A good wife makes the cares of the world sit easy, and adds a sweetness to its pleasures; she is a man’s best companion in prosperity, and his only friend in adversity; the carefulest preserver of his health, and the kindest attendant in his sickness; a faithful adviser in distress, a comforter in affliction, and a prudent manager in all his domestick affairs.” *Plainly*, from a fragment of *Euripides* preserved by *Stobaeus*:

“ Γυνὴ γὰρ ἡ κακοῖσι καὶ νόσοις πάσῃ
 “ Ήδοτέοις ἴστι, δύματ’ ἡ οἰκῇ καλῶς,
 “ Ὁργῇ τι προτίνειν, καὶ διδυμίας
 “ Σφηγὸν μεθιστᾶς!” —— Par. 4to. 1628.

Malvolio, in the *Twelfth Night* of Shakspeare, hath some expressions very similar to *Alnaschar* in the *Arabian Tales*; which perhaps may be sufficient for some criticks to prove his acquaintance with *Arabic!*

It seems however, at last, that “*Taste* should determine the matter.” This, as *Bardolph* expresses it, is a *word of exceeding good command*: but I am willing that the standard itself be somewhat better ascertained before it be opposed to demonstrative evidence.—Upon the whole, I

may consider myself as the *pioneer* of the *commentators*: I have removed a deal of *learned rubbish*, and pointed out to them *Shakspeare's* track in the ever-pleasing *paths of nature*. This was necessarily a previous inquiry; and I hope I may assume with some confidence, what one of the first critics of the age was pleased to declare on reading the former edition, that “The question is now for ever decided.”

A D V E R T I S E M E N T

PREFIXED TO

THE THIRD EDITION,

1789.

IT may be necessary to apologize for the re-publication of this pamphlet. The fact is, it has been for a good while extremely scarce, and some mercenary publishers were induced by the extravagant price, which it has occasionally borne, to project a new edition without the consent of the author.

A few corrections might probably be made, and many additional proofs of the argument have necessarily occurred in more than twenty years; some of which may be found in the late admirable editions of our Poet, by Mr. *Steevens* and Mr. *Reed*.

But, perhaps enough is already said on so light a subject;—a subject, however, which had for a long time pretty warmly divided the criticks upon *Shakspeare*.

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Addressed to JOSEPH CRADOCK, Esq.

“SHAKSPEARE,” says a brother of the *craft**, “is a vast garden of criticism:” and certainly no one can be favoured with more weeder *gratis*.

But how often, my dear sir, are weeds and flowers torn up indiscriminately?—the ravaged spot is replanted in a moment, and a profusion of critical thorns thrown over it for security.

“A prudent man, therefore, would not venture his fingers amongst them.”

Be however in little pain for your friend, who regards himself sufficiently to be cautious:—yet he asserts with confidence, that no improvement can be expected, whilst the natural soil is mistaken for a hot-bed, and the natives of the banks of *Avon*

* Mr. Seward, in his Preface to *Beaumont and Fletcher*.
10 vols. 8vo, 1750.

are scientifically choked with the culture of exoticks.

Thus much for metaphor; it is contrary to the *statute* to fly out so early: but who can tell, whether it may not be demonstrated by some critick or other, that a deviation from rule is peculiarly happy in an *Essay on Shakspeare*?

You have long known my opinion concerning the literary acquisitions of our immortal dramatist, and remember how I congratulated myself on my coincidence with the last and best of his editors. I told you, however, that his *small Latin and less Greek** would still be litigated, and you see very assuredly that I was not mistaken. The trumpet hath been sounded against "the darling project of representing Shakspeare as one of the illiterate vulgar;" and indeed to so good purpose, that I would by all means recommend the performer to the army of the *braying fuction*, recorded by *Cervantes*. The testimony of his contemporaries is again disputed; constant tradition is opposed by flimsy arguments; and nothing

* This passage of *Ben Jonson*, so often quoted, is given us in the admirable preface to the late edition, with a various reading, "small Latin and *no* Greek," which hath been held up to the publick for a modern sophiscation: yet whether an error or not, it was adopted above a century ago by *W. Towers*, in a panegyrick on *C. His Eulogy*, with more than fifty ot

is heard, but confusion and nonsense. One could scarcely imagine this a topick very likely to inflame the passions: it is asserted by Dryden, that "those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greatest commendation;" yet an attack upon an article of faith hath been usually received with more temper and complacence, than the unfortunate opinion which I am about to defend.

But let us previously lament with every lover of Shakspeare that the question was not fully discussed by Mr. Johnson himself: what he sees intuitively, others must arrive at by a series of proofs; and I have not time to teach with precision: be contented therefore with a few cursory observations, as they may happen to arise from the chaos of papers you have so often laughed at, "a stock sufficient to set up an *editor in form*." I am convinced of the strength of my cause, and superior to any little advantage from sophistical arrangements.

General positions without proofs will probably have no great weight on either side, yet it may not seem fair to suppress them: take them therefore as their authors occur to me, and we will afterward proceed to particulars.

The testimony of Ben stands foremost; and some have held it sufficient to decide the controversy: in the warmest panegyrick that ever was

written, he apologizes* for what *he* supposed the only defect in his “beloved friend,—

‘ ——— Soul of the age!
‘ Th’ applause! delight! the wonder of our stage!—

whose memory he honoured almost to idolatry:” and conscious of the worth of ancient literature, like any other man on the same occasion, he rather carries his acquirements *above* than *below* the truth. “Jealousy!” cries Mr. Upton; “people will allow others any qualities, but those upon which they highly value *themselves*.” Yes, where there *is* a competition; and the competitor formidable: but, I think, this critick himself hath scarcely set in opposition the learning of Shakspeare and Jonson. When a superiority is universally granted, it by no means appears a man’s literary interest to depress the reputation of his antagonist.

In truth, the received opinion of the pride and malignity of Jonson, at least in the earlier part of life, is absolutely groundless: at this time scarce a play or a poem appeared without Ben’s encomium, from the original Shakspeare to the translator of Du Bartas.

But Jonson is by no means our only authority. Drayton, the “countryman and ‘acquaintance of

town before our poet left the stage, is very strong to the purpose :

“ —— Nature only helpt him, for looke thorow
 “ This whole book, thou shalt find he doth not borow;
 “ One phrase from Greekes, not Latines imitate,
 “ Nor once from vulgar languages translate*”.

Suckling opposed his *easier strain* to the *sweat of the learned Jonson*. Denham assures us, that all he had was from *old mother-wit*. *His native wood-notes wild*, every one remembers to be celebrated by Milton. Dryden observes prettily enough, that “ he wanted not the spectacles of books to read nature.” He came out of her hand, as some one else expresses it, like *Pallas* out of *Jove’s head*, at full growth and mature.

The ever memorable Hales of Eton (who, notwithstanding his epithet, is, I fear, almost forgotten) had too great a knowledge both of Shakspeare and the ancients to allow much acquaintance between them ; and urged very justly on the part of genius in opposition to pedantry, that “ if he had not *read* the classicks, he had likewise not *stolen* from them ; and if any topick

* From his *Poem upon Master William Shakspeare*, intended to have been prefixed, with the other of his composition, to the folio of 1623, and afterward printed in several miscellaneous collections; particularly the spurious edition of *Shakspeare’s Poems*, 1640. Some account of him may be met with in *Wood’s Athenæ*.

was produced from a poet of antiquity, he would undertake to show somewhat on the same subject, at least, as well written by Shakspeare."

Fuller, a diligent and equal searcher after truth and quibbles, declares positively, that "his learning was very little,—*nature* was all the *art* used upon him, as *he himself*, if alive, would confess." And may we not say, he did confess it, when he apologized for his *untutored lines* to his noble patron the Earl of Southampton?—This list of witnesses might be easily enlarged; but I flatter myself I shall stand in no need of such evidence.

One of the first and most vehement assertors of the learning of Shakspeare, was the editor of his poems, the well-known Mr. Gildon*; and his steps were most punctually taken by a subsequent labourer in the same department, Dr. Sewell.

* Hence perhaps the *ill-starr'd rage* between this critick and his elder brother, John Dennis, so pathetically lamented in the *Dunciad*. Whilst the former was persuaded that "the man who doubts of the learning of Shakspeare hath none of his own," the latter, above regarding the attack in his *private* capacity, declares with great patriotick vehemence, that "he who allows Shakspeare had learning, and a familiar acquaintance with the ancients, ought to be looked upon as a detractor from the glory of Great Britain." Dennis was expelled his college for attempting to stab a